Connecting professors with technology is a balance that's often hard to strike at the online university level. While some universities choose to hire adjunct faculty and part-time instructors, other schools make the administrative decision to maintain an online teaching staff of PhD faculty. For schools that choose to keep PhDs in teaching positions, administrators find unique challenges along the way, not the least of which arrives in the form of faculty members who may be experts in their field but are wholly unprepared for online pedagogy.

Terminal degree staffing pays off at one blended learning university

At least one school has reaped the rewards of PhD-only hiring. Recently, the online degree programs at the University of Bridgeport were named among the top in the nation by US News and World Report's list of 2013 Best Online Education Programs. "What set [University of Bridgeport] apart for its online program is that our online classes are taught by full-time, high-ranking faculty," says Leslie Geary, Director of Public Information and Media Relations at the University of Bridgeport. "It sets us apart from many other universities, where online teaching is conducted by part timers who don't have these degrees."

Tarek M. Sobh, PhD, Dean of the School of Engineering at the University of Bridgeport, agrees that the distinction matters. "Ideally speaking, online courses should never be thought of as a different entity. Whether a class is online or on the ground, execution is much better off if the faculty members are credentialed," he says. "It bodes much better for the program, it makes particular courses much stronger, and it's much better than outsourcing." Bridgeport's faculty each take two to three courses per semester, typically with one online course included. While some schools add online coursework to an already full course load, the balance at the University of Bridgeport gives faculty members the time and focus to pursue their research and publishing goals.

Different disciplines feature different learning curves to online education

Surprisingly, Dr. Sobh reports that there was no additional training required for members of his Engineering faculty; rather, they simply draw on the high-level skills they've practiced in their field. "They have had training for many years," he says. "Tools like Canvas or Blackboard is second nature." He admits that a professor in the Humanities might require some special training before setting up learning management systems, but the engineers hit the ground running. "Engineering faculty members have their own pages," he adds. "They have a repository of interactive streaming tools and video."

The University of Bridgeport was the first university in Connecticut to offer online classes, in 1997. Since then, their faculty has arguably had ample time to explore LMS like Canvas and Blackboard, to create their own coursework online and to grow comfortable with the blended and online learning modalities. These self-taught faculty members aren't only learning out of curiosity; they're potentially saving their own jobs in the years to come.

Advice for administration striking a balance with high-level faculty

1. **Work within departments**. Some individuals, like those in Dr. Sobh's engineering faculty, might not need any training to get online. Others, such as those in the arts, could require extensive training.
2. **Bring in experts**. Online content strategists—typically used to create on-brand content for web development within companies—can prove useful allies for struggling PhD faculty trying to reinvent their lesson plans online.
3. **Explore the tools**. Canvas and Blackboard feature robust support networks for students and faculty alike. Give faculty members a chance to explore the sandbox before releasing them to create their own classes from scratch.

Expectations rising for the future of blended learning

Current and future faculty members should pay attention to the shift towards blended and fully-online learning; failure to evolve could be disastrous for a professor's career. Dr. Sobh notes that all future faculty at the University of Bridgeport will likely be expected to participate in blended courses, online courses, overseas courses, and partner institutions overseas, in addition to standard research and publication requirements. "We should never hire faculty with the expectation that they would not teach online," he says.

As student demand for high-quality online education only continues to rise, administrators can begin to expect more from their tenured faculty members. The colleges and universities that take top honors for blended and online courses will be the ones with agile content, expert technologists, and motivated faculty pursuing the same excellence in scholarship they've always valued.